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## Totems That Tell About the Past and the Future

'Huma Bhabha: Unnatural Histories' at MoMA PS1

Karen Rosenberg | December 6, 2012



Huma Bhabha's "Unnatural Histories" (2012). Credit Matthew Septimus

In "Huma Bhabha: Unnatural Histories," at MoMA PS1, long-enduring forms from the ancient world lend some gravity to the throwaway materials that are now commonplace in contemporary sculpture. You could also say that the precariousness of recent assemblage and installation art haunts Ms. Bhabha's monstrous, totemic figures, which are typically made of Styrofoam, clay, rubber, wood scraps and wire mesh; either way, the juxtaposition is arresting.

It's apparent from the very first glimpse of the show, via the two bronze sculptures that flank the entrance to the museum. One, "God of Some Things," shows a stylized

figure with flattened breasts and a Princess Leia hairdo emerging from a rectangular solid. The other, "Ghost of Humankindness," has a crumbling clay mask of a face and a blocky body made of cast packing materials. Together they seem to bookend the history of figurative sculpture, from ancient fertility icons to what could be the last vestiges of the human race.

Ms. Bhabha, who was born in Pakistan in 1962, is something of a late bloomer. The show at PS1 is her first New York museum solo; it follows a string of high-profile group-show appearances (in the 2008 Gwangju Biennial, the 2010 Whitney Biennial and the 2012 Paris Triennial).

It includes, alongside some 30 recent sculptures, about a dozen collage-drawings that layer skeletal heads over desolate-looking landscapes. These two-dimensional works (the focus of a smaller show at the Aspen Art Museum in 2011) often incorporate photographs of Karachi, Ms. Bhabha's native city, giving her multifarious, polytheistic beings a more defined sense of place. And they complement the sculptures in other ways, highlighting the gestural glue that holds them together.

As the PS1 curator Peter Eleey points out in his introduction to the exhibition, Ms. Bhabha's sculptures "may appear bound to a distant past, while also seeming to arrive from the decaying ruins of some future civilization." Specific poses and pieces suggest Greek kouros, African sculptures, Easter Island heads and Egyptian statues, as well as the reworkings of these forms by modern artists like Picasso and Giacometti.

Mr. Eleey also mentions the hybrid Greek-Buddhist figures from ancient Gandhara (now northern Pakistan) — a reference that seems especially germane given Ms. Bhabha's background (she immigrated to the United States in the 1980s), and especially potent with a show of sculpture from Gandhara fresh in memory.

The first work on view inside the galleries — the sprawling "Unnatural Histories," made specifically for the exhibition — is a kind of alien blob with lopsided eyes and clay skin that seems to ooze over a Styrofoam skeleton. It also appears to have swallowed, or merged with, a human; standing to the side of the sculpture, you can see a photo-cutout of a man propped up behind it.

This strange life form, whatever it is, also has a long tail made from a cut-up rubber tire; it may put you in mind of Rauschenberg's prints, although his combines with stuffed animals seem most relevant to Ms. Bhabha's methods. (It's not surprising to learn, from the wall text, that she once worked for a taxidermist.)

The side galleries hold smaller, slightly less recent works. The earliest, from 2005, evince a more classical approach to the figure. Here, for instance, is "Sleeper," a man with a curly beard who would not look wildly out of place in the Met's Greek and Roman Galleries had he been carved from marble rather than made of Styrofoam topped with clay.

Soon, though, bricolage takes over and the human body acquires some strange prosthetics. The one-foot-forward pose in "Chain of Missing Links" still evokes the youthful athleticism of the kouros, but the components of the figure (more Styrofoam, along with rusted metal, plexiglass, an animal skull and a seedpod) evoke dissolution and decay.

Scale generally works to Ms. Bhabha's advantage; the smaller sculptures of heads clustered in one of the galleries don't have quite the same impact, although they play nicely with drawings of similar size. In the larger works she's able to engage architecture — either by referring to ancient palace and temple statuary or by constructing the figure as if it were a kind of building.

"Jhukarjodaro," a giant foot made of crumbling clay over a wood and chicken-wire armature, looks as if it has broken off from some monumental relic. A ripped photograph of a rocky landscape has been affixed to the wooden pedestal; possibly, it depicts the archaeological site in Pakistan for which the work is named.

What you see, here and throughout the show, are not just romantic ruins or contextless fragments; Ms. Bhabha has a raw and sometimes violent approach to sculpture that feels very contemporary but makes you think about the way we excavate and display the art of past civilizations.



Huma Bhabha's "Twins" (2011). Credit Collection Marilyn and Larry Fields, Chicago, Courtesy the artist and Salon 94